

1.0 Purpose of and Need for the Project

1.1 Introduction

The proposed East End Connector has a long history, dating from 1959 when it was introduced as part of the City of Durham Thoroughfare Plan. This project has been incorporated in City plans and transportation studies since the 1970's and was established as the City's top priority transportation project in the year 2000. The history of the proposed East End Connector is directly linked to the East-West Freeway (NC 147 between interstate I-40 and interstate I-85). The two projects were planned simultaneously during the preparation of a 1982 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). This 1982 FEIS and subsequent Record of Decision allowed the East-West Freeway, now known as the Durham Freeway or NC147¹, to be completed in 1992; however, the proposed East End Connector did not receive funding and was not constructed.

Interest in the proposed East End Connector re-surfaced in the late 1990's; and in 1998 the North Carolina Department of Transportation initiated further study of the 1982 Final Environmental Impact Statement as it relates to the proposed East End Connector; however, funding was not allocated. In 2003 the proposed East End Connector project was added to the list of projects eligible for the North Carolina Highway Trust Fund program and in 2005, a new study was initiated to again re-evaluate the 1982 FEIS. This Environmental Assessment (EA) is the resulting planning document of the 2005 – 2008 re-evaluation and includes updating the roadway design alternatives and associated traffic impact analysis, socioeconomic analysis, natural resources, biological resources, historical and cultural resources and right-of-way/relocation impacts for the proposed project.

Federal regulations, specifically 23 CFR 771.129(b) and (c), require that the Federal Highway Administration conduct re-evaluations of Final Environmental Impact Statements (FEIS) before further approvals are granted to advance a project toward construction when no major steps to advance the project have occurred within three years of approval of the FEIS. According to 23 CFR 771.130(c) and the Federal Highway Administration's Technical Advisory T6640.8A, an Environmental Assessment may be prepared as the written re-evaluation for a proposed action. Federal regulations, specifically 23 CFR 771.130(c) states, "where the Administration is uncertain of the significance of the new impacts, the applicant will develop appropriate environmental studies or, if the Administration deems appropriate, an EA to assess the impacts of the changes, new information, or new circumstances." Due to the amount of time that has passed since the FEIS was first approved, the similarity in scope and study area to the 1982 FEIS, and the possibility of new or significant impacts, the Federal Highway Administration has determined that an Environmental Assessment is the most appropriate tool for evaluating and clearly documenting any new or significant impacts identified during the re-evaluation process. If no significant impacts are identified during preparation of the EA, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) will be issued for the proposed project and compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act will be complete.

This EA is prepared in accordance with Title 23 CFR (Highways) Part 771.129 and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Technical Advisory T6640.8A and has followed the North Carolina Department of Transportation Merger 01 Environmental Planning Process.

¹ NC 147 is also known as the I. L. "Buck" Dean Freeway – NCDOT Transportation Improvement Program 2006 – 2012.